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Affective Assemblages and Local Economies

Joanie Willett, Rowman & Littlefield, London (2021)

Vii + 178pp, Hardback

\$105 USD / £81

ISBN 978-1-5381-5070-2

Attention to the ‘geographies of discontent’ has ignited new interest in peripheral regions – or, at least, become the required reference for discussing spatial inequalities (and what to do about them). Joanie Willett’s *Affective Assemblages and Local Economies* duly begins with the 2016 ‘Brexit’ referendum. Willett is Co-Director of the Institute for Cornish Studies, and Cornwall was formerly one of only two ‘less developed’ NUTS2 regions in the UK. As the narrative now runs, despite long-term EU funding, Cornwall voted to leave. Yet Willett casts her concerns beyond the potted plots of ballot box revenge. This is a book about where the work to understand and address regional inequalities turns *next*.

Willett’s ambitions bely the book’s slight size: “to propose an entirely new ontological perspective for our analysis and treatment of regions” (p. 159). Ostensibly, this means advancing a conceptual framework for understanding regions as ‘complex adaptive assemblages’. Thinking through assemblages – neither random nor fixed collections of materials, ideas and actions that guide particular ways of being or doing – has accompanied the rise of Deleuzian thought in the Anglophone humanities and social sciences, and echoes the theoretical decoupling of network relations from a solely human sphere. By combining theory with geographical applications, Willett formulates the *regional* assemblage as “a series of nested, complex, intertwined, and interactive networks linking ideas, concepts, structures, practices, and institutions in particular ways, at particular times and around particular things” (p. 28).

There is much to unpack here, and it is deftly done across the first three chapters. Willett is adept at translating often nebulous ideas for a wider regional studies audience, whether neatly

parsing affect theory (a minor academic industry itself) or introducing Bergsonian temporality (without tears). Such conceptual clarity should earn the book space on many different shelves. Readers mystified by mention of assemblage and affect, or coming to the concepts for the first time, will find explanations made the more digestible through helpful analogy. Equally, readers already in the theoretical know will find plenty to reflect on, extend and remix.

Come for the concepts – stay for the case studies. Willett works with theory as building blocks that can be analytically applied. Four empirical chapters illustrate the framework through two case regions. Rural Cornwall and Southwest Virginia (US) each, distinctly, struggle for spatial justice amidst precarity and peripherality. In Willett's hands, the adaptive assemblage lens simultaneously accommodates lived experiences of place and the relational space in which regions are enmeshed, situating both within constant change. In Cornwall, we see how a region readily viewed through a limited and limiting tourist imaginary squeezes opportunities and squanders talent. In Virginia, obsolete industrial paths leave pain and loss, but coexist with the warmth of family and familiarity. Both regions oscillate between *adaptation*, as new and potentially transformative 'lines of flight' take shape, and *entropy*, as peripheralization processes dissipate energy, vitality, and possibility.

Neither region stands in for rurality; neither for post-industrial transition. Though common patterns play out, these do not reduce to convenient labels or simple spatial binaries, and they do not form singular paths. While a conceptual framework alive to such nuanced complexity leads to few plug-and-play policy responses (which is rather the point), the book's conclusions thankfully avoid slipping into those all-to-easy platitudes: more funding, less neoliberalism. Instead, there are thoughtful insights on, for example, tackling the reproduction of low-paid work, confronting the limits of an amenity-based economy, and recognising "a poverty of available opportunity" (p. 130).

Willett's ability to draw insight from the realities of riding a bus to a depressing job or being priced out of property markets suggest why qualitative methods matter for regional studies, too. New perspectives need a refreshed methodology, and although the book is less instructive here, there are encouraging glimpses at how regional studies scholars might shake our qualitative confines from the usual clutch of expert interviews. Ranging from walking methods to tracing place through fiction, Willett allows her methodology to creatively accompany her theory. She also admits when experimental approaches fall flat, boding well for testing future research tools.

Those who prefer regions to be revealed through spreadsheets rather than muddy boots might grumble about unvalidated opinion, but this is not another of those journalistic accounts that, following 2016, have presented places marked by their voting patterns as though exotically set apart. At home in Cornwall, Willett crosses the Atlantic with an outsider's gaze, the interplay between perspectives proving productive rather than trite. Writing of the regularly 'othered' Appalachian Mountains, Willett resists serving a staple imagery of poverty, populism and progressive *quelle horreur*. A parallel might be drawn to affect theorist Kathleen Stewart's (1996) acclaimed ethnography, *A Space on the Side of the Road*. Whereas Stewart proffers a poetics of Appalachian peripherality, however, Willett does not rest at representation. The book carries a will for practical change.

To consider that shifting our conceptual lens on regions can redress long-term inequalities would, of course, be an over-statement. An adaptive assemblage is ultimately more a way of seeing than a tool for solving. But the fundamental contribution of this book lies indeed in the recognition that we *do* need new ways of seeing regions that remain eclipsed by the one-dimensional story of economic success. The old language of 'lagging regions' – wrapping judgment in GDP – no longer suffices. And, as the last quantitative drops are wrung

from electoral data, the new language of ‘left-behind places’ risks becoming over-rehearsed and conceptually stuck. The turn to peripheries needs another timely twist.

Willett may (or may not) win wholehearted converts to the new ontological perspective she promises. That ambition is perhaps less crucial to an emerging critically, theoretically, and empirically informed scholarship of peripherality. This is a scholarship finding form within regional studies through an ‘edgy’ reconceptualization of where the margins are, how they are shaped and lived, and why they truly matter. By tracing Cornwall and South Virginia in all their change and complexity, Willett adds a lively voice – and sounds a drum for future advances in theory and method. There is undoubtedly more to come.

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